



Study: Poultry industry potential cause of E. coli outbreak

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— A new study has pointed the finger at the poultry industry as the possible cause of last fall's deadly E. coli outbreak in northeast Oklahoma and intensified the political friction between Attorney General Drew Edmondson and some state lawmakers.

The largest breakout of E. coli 0111 — a deadly bacteria that is spread through human or animal waste — killed one person and sickened hundreds who ate at the Country Cottage restaurant in Locust Grove last August.

The restaurant reopened in November, but investigations are continuing to determine the exact source of the bacteria.

Edmondson, a Democrat who has announced plans to run for governor last year, released the results of an investigation in mid-February asserting that poultry waste was the source of the outbreak. But poultry companies, including Tyson Foods, and some state legislators countered that Edmondson's conclusions were unfounded.

A new study released by the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality last week appeared to lend credence to Edmondson's claims. It found that 59 of 74 tested wells in northeast Oklahoma, home to numerous poultry farms, showed indicators of environmental pollution. Of those 59 wells, 17 tested positive for E. coli.

"This certainly helps our case," Edmondson said. "It's not conclusive, it's not beyond a reasonable doubt, but it's stronger."

The study, however, did not indicate which specific types of E. coli that were present in the tested wells.

Leslea Bennett-Webb, a spokeswoman for the Oklahoma Department of Health, said most types of E. coli are harmless. She said E. coli 0111 is a rare form of suga toxin — a category of E. coli that makes people sick, often fatally.

Webb said there is no peer-reviewed research that shows linkage between E. coli 0111 and anything but animal or human fecal matter. Edmondson said his investigation showed the disease came from the intestines of an animal rather than a human.

"We know it was either beef or chicken," he said. "There aren't any cattle feedlots in the area. There are, though, plenty of chicken farms. People don't like the claim because it strikes at the heart of how they do business. If it turns out, beyond a reasonable doubt, to be poultry, then people will have to change the way they do business. No company wants to do that."

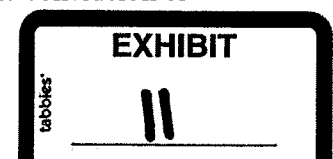
Edmondson said the bacteria found in the wells around Country Cottage were similar to the bacteria found a year ago after a nearby E. coli outbreak in the area surrounding the Illinois River. In that case, Edmondson said, experts testified that poultry waste was the cause.

"This is the exact same part of the state," he said. "And it's the same result."

The Department of Health still is conducting research to try to identify the source of the bacteria. Webb said the department has tested all of the wells surrounding the restaurant, all of the food handlers and the restaurant itself, and is still unable to identify the source. She said the results of the research will not be released for some time.

"We're still searching to find out exactly where this came from," she said. "That's the big mystery. And there are a lot of factors to consider. Some of these wells were in pretty bad shape."

Webb declined to comment on whether linking the breakout to poultry waste is a reasonable conclusion or just conjecture.



Rep. Doug Cox, R-Grove, said he thinks Edmondson's claims are not based on solid facts.

"As a physician, I tend to work with the facts," Cox said. "I feel like the attorney general worked mainly off of suppositions. He hasn't demonstrated the scientific facts, and the health department hasn't come to those conclusions. He's made clean water one of his missions, and I'm for clean water, but this is just bad publicity for the poultry industry."

Edmondson disagreed. "The only scientists who are talking about this are saying it's poultry," he said. "To my knowledge, the poultry industry hasn't hired any scientists to examine the bacteria and the wells to try to determine the source for themselves. That's irresponsible."

Edmondson said the solution to the problem is to change the way the industry deals with poultry waste. It should either be confined so it will not spread or treated chemically to eliminate its potential to harm humans, he said.

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